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ABSTRACT

P-16 education is an integrated system of education stretching from early childhood through a 4-year college, emphasizing continuity of student learning and alignment across school levels. It seeks to address problems with the present educational system, considering, for example, that "A" students in high-poverty schools score at the same level as "C" and "D" students in affluent schools, and 29 percent of college freshmen take one or more remedial courses in reading, writing, or mathematics. P-16 education has five central goals: to have every child ready for school by age 6, proficient in reading by 8, proficient in geometry and algebra by 13, completing a rigorous core curriculum by 17, and expected to complete the first 2 years of college by 21. P-16 strengths are inclusiveness, alignment, removal of artificial barriers, and reductions in level of remediation. Challenges include reliance on individual leaders, too little time, too much turf consciousness, lack of evidence, and lack of a common language. However, 25 states have passed P-16 legislation, implementing the system either as a broad, sweeping reform, or as a continuum of incremental changes. Further research is needed on the impact of P-16 on student achievement and appropriate forms of governance and finance. (Contains 12 references.) (RT)

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P-16 Education

By Gordon (Spud) Van de Water and Carl Krueger

P-16 education is an integrated system of education stretching from early childhood through a four-year college degree. Advocates of this innovation in education governance believe it is growing in popularity because it is more responsive to society's needs.

P-16 emphasizes continuity of student learning. In a time when student progress from one level to the next needs to be easily understood and widely supported, P-16 focuses on alignment across sectors, not isolation within sectors.

Worldwide, new information is being generated at an astounding rate. In addition, demographics, technology, and global competition are putting stress on our historical methods of organizing education. P-16 focuses on new structures responsive to these current conditions, rather than maintaining the status quo.

The concept, however, is not without its critics. Some view P-16 as no more than a passing fad, while others assert that it fails to address the problems facing K-12 and higher education. Turf or money issues may explain some of this opposition, but a lack of information about the strengths and challenges of a P-16 system also contributes to skepticism surrounding the issue. This Digest seeks to dispel some of the confusion regarding P-16 and stimulate discussion about the future of education in the United States.

Why Is P-16 Education Important?

There is widespread agreement that all students in our schools and colleges need to learn more to lead successful economic and civic lives as adults in the 21st century. Implicit in this consensus is the notion that the current system is not capable of bringing this about. Consider these data points (Haycock and Huang 2001):

- Fewer than three in ten teenagers think their school is "very academically rigorous."
- "A" students in high-poverty schools score at the same level as "C" and "D" students in affluent schools.
- Seventy-two percent of high school graduates go on to some form of postsecondary education, yet only 44 percent have taken a college-prep curriculum.
- Twenty-nine percent of college freshmen take one or more remedial courses in reading, writing, or math.
- By age 24, 7 percent of young people from low-income families have graduated from college, versus 48 percent from high-income families.

These are signs of a system under stress. This is not the first time our country has faced a need for change.

Prior to 1920, a majority of the population worked on farms, and universal public education was seen as necessary only through the elementary grades. In 1900, only 10 percent of 14- to 17-year-olds entered high school, and 8 percent of the population were high school graduates (Snyder and Hoffman 2001).

By the middle of the 1920s the number of jobs involved in manufacturing and commerce had exceeded those in agriculture. The new Industrial Age required higher order literacies, and the pressure to expand universal education to include high school began to build. By 1940, the number of 14- to 17-year-olds attending high school had increased to 70 percent, and about one-half of those who entered high school received diplomas (National Center for Education Statistics 2001). The lesson that these statistics teach is that when the workplace demands increased skills and knowledge, the public supports the extension of the education system.

As the 21st century dawns, Americans are once again experiencing a profound and rapid shift—from an Industrial Age to an Information Age. To secure their future within the new workplace, young people now need the skills and knowledge associated with at least two years of college. The minimum endpoint of education is moving from grade 12 to grade 14, and most students hope to complete grade 16.

Today's students understand the value of postsecondary education and skills: more than 90 percent of high school graduates now expect to complete at least some college, and more than 70 percent expect to receive a college degree (Schneider and Stevenson 2000)

The role played by high schools in the 1940s and 1950s is now being played by colleges and universities, and the patterns of attendance and graduation that existed in high school during the 1930s and 1940s are now unfolding in higher education.

What Are the Goals of P-16 Education?

P-16 education builds on previous work in standards, assessment, and accountability. P-16 has two fundamental goals: (1) to raise the achievement levels of all learners, and (2) to close the achievement gap among groups of learners. While a variety of specific goals have been pursued, these five are central:

- Every child ready for school by age 6
- Every child proficient in reading by age 8
- Every child proficient in geometry and algebra by age 13
- Every learner completing a rigorous core curriculum by age 17
- Every learner expected to complete the first two years of college by age 21

To achieve these goals, a P-16 system stresses these factors: the use of research to guide decisions about when and how children learn; a clearly articulated set of high expectations; improvement of teaching quality; and the use of data to measure progress.

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Typical P-16 structural goals include the following:

- Starting universal public education at age three
- Smoothing transitions from one level of education to the next
- Moving from a Carnegie-unit system to a competency-based system
- Creating more flexible learning opportunities for adolescent learners
- Moving the accepted end point of public education from grade 12 to grade 14

Achieving these goals means grappling with a host of complex issues, including standards, testing, teacher education, college admissions policies, governance, funding streams, and institutional turf issues, to name just a few. P-16 provides a framework for addressing these issues in a systematic way while keeping the focus on learners.

What Are P-16's Strengths and Challenges?

A successful P-16 system will exhibit a number of strengths. Among them are:

- *Inclusiveness*—everyone expected to meet rigorous learning standards
- *Alignment*—of standards, curricula, expectations, assessments
- *Support*—for all learners as they strive to meet learning standards
- *Removal of artificial barriers*—especially those surrounding the transition from high school to college (for example, high school exit requirements, college entrance requirements, college placement assessments)
- *Reductions in level of remediation*—high expectations, clear standards, and strong support services leading to better-prepared students able to meet postsecondary expectations upon entry

A P-16 system will have to overcome several challenges before it exhibits the strengths outlined above. These challenges include:

- *Reliance on individual leaders:* Early efforts are at risk of reverting to old ways when key leaders burn out or move on.
- *Too little time:* Already struggling with constant demands, educators have little time for "big picture" thinking or cross-level collaboration.
- *Too much turf consciousness:* Isolated boards, fractured funding processes, disconnected policy decisions all reinforce turf boundaries and the status quo.
- *Lack of evidence:* Most P-16 efforts are too new to yield solid research evidence of their impact on learning.
- *Lack of a common language:* New efforts require a new vocabulary; P-16 has yet to settle on a vocabulary.

Who's Doing P-16 and What Results Are They Getting?

Twenty-five states have already passed some form of P-16 legislation. P-16 can be implemented as either a "mega-bill" introducing broad, sweeping changes or as a continuum of incremental changes. Incremental approaches build a P-16 system piece by piece. Over time, the pieces combine to create a comprehensive P-16 system that is wholly different from its predecessor.

While most states are using the incremental approach, some have chosen a more comprehensive strategy, addressing governance, finance, standards, assessments, admissions, and program changes at all levels. The most notable example of this approach is in Georgia, where former Governor Zell Miller created a P-16 initiative in 1995 that current Governor Roy Barnes renewed and expanded in 2000. Georgia leaders have seen the percentage of high school students taking a rigorous core curriculum climb from 76 percent to 91 percent, average SAT scores rise from 980 to 1030, and remediation levels drop by 50 percent.

More recently, Louisiana has initiated an ambitious P-16 effort. Early returns indicate that an integrated system of education is leading to higher student achievement: the percent of Louisiana's second- and third-graders reading at or above grade level rose from 54 percent in 1998 to 72 percent in 2000, while the percentage of college freshmen taking remedial courses declined from 53 percent in 1992 to 39 percent in 2000 (Louisiana State Department of Education 2002).

P-16 efforts also occur in regional contexts. A leading example is the El Paso Collaborative for Academic Achievement, a decade-long cooperative effort involving the community, schools, community college, and university in El Paso, Texas. In 1992, El Paso had fifteen low-performing schools and no exemplary schools on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills. By 2000, the picture had reversed: no low-performing schools and eighteen exemplary schools (Texas Education Agency 2002).

Much more evidence is needed concerning what works in a P-16 system. Further research is also needed on the impact of P-16 approaches on student achievement and appropriate forms of governance and finance. Policymakers will continue to debate issues such as when public education should begin and end, the merits of a competency-based system, and the skills and knowledge required of every educated citizen. P-16 provides a possible framework to address these issues in both the statehouse and the schoolhouse.

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